WORLD CHRONICLE

UNITED NATIONS

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PROGRAMME: **"WORLD CHRONICLE"**

GUEST: Dr. Arcot Ramachandran, Executive Director
United Nations Centre for Human Settlements
(HABITAT)

JOURNALISTS: Obi Emekekwue, News Agency of Nigeria

Maria Garcia, Nucleo Radio Mil

Roy Murphy, TV New Zealand

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

HABITAT

Dr. Arcot Ramachandran, Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT), highlights the importance of using local materials and technology in the construction of affordable housing for the needy in both urban and rural areas. He strongly advocates the involvement of the people themselves in the planning and building of their habitat.

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VOICE: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

Over the last four decades, the world's population has doubled, exceeding 5 billion people. Today, one fifth of the world's inhabitants live without adequate shelter. In fact, over 100 million people are homeless. Since its establishment in 1978, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements or Habitat has been the focal point for mobilizing international efforts to provide housing for the world's needy.

Our guest today, Dr. Arcot Ramachandran, is the Executive Director of Habitat. A national of India, Dr. Ramachandran will be interviewed here at United Nations headquarters in New York by: Obi Emekekwue of the News Agency of Nigeria; Maria Garcia of Nucleo Radio Mil; and Roy Murphy of TV New Zealand.

Before we begin our discussion with Dr. Ramachandran, let's look at how one country assisted by Habitat, tackles its housing problem. Our correspondent Steve Whitehouse reports:

WHITEHOUSE: Engineer Jorge Gutierrez arrives at an Indian village in eastern Costa Rica. He's checking on the progress of a housing project that's using an age-old construction material as part of an ambitious national effort to tackle the country's housing crisis.

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In the past, local timber was employed for rural housing. The building technique was low quality. It also contributed to the destruction of the tropical rain forest. Now, villagers are building their own houses from a material widely used in other parts of the tropics, but new to Costa Rica - bamboo. Project Manager, Ana Cecilia Chaves, explains why.

CHAVES: (ON CAMERA) (In Spanish)

Bamboo, she says, grows so rapidly that it's possible to use it in only five years. It helps solve the housing problems for communities, regions, and the country.

WHITEHOUSE: Suitable bamboo is not indigenous to Costa Rica. A promising species has been introduced from Colombia. These young plants grow to maturity in three to five years. Plantations are being established in appropriate parts of the country.

Currently, the bamboo is used as the exterior cladding of houses. The bamboo is dried, split and unfolded to form panels. These are attached to the frame of the houses. One advantage is that the material is particularly earthquake-resistant.

The exterior is then plastered and eventually painted. Bamboo is cheap and light. Householders including women, do the construction themselves.

Families in the pilot project receive interest-free loans from the UN Development Programme, UNDP.

As more bamboo comes on stream, the National Bamboo Project, supported by the UNDP and the Dutch government, plans to use the material for the frame of houses as well as the outside covering. Jorge Gutierrez sees a big future for the technology.

With indigenous bamboo stocks now available, he says, 7,000 houses can use it. Eventually, one-third of all new housing in Costa Rica will incorporate the material.

Costa Rica plans to replace all substandard housing, such as this squatter area, in the next few years. Bamboo is set to play an important part in this effort.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Ramachandran, that was a very interesting sequence we just saw, but I guess that bamboo is of limited use in many countries that don't have an abundance of this material. Of course, here in New York City, it is estimated that there may be as many as between 30,000 and 50,000 homeless people and I guess, bamboo wouldn't be much good here. What are you doing in other countries to develop low cost housing to help solve this problem of the homeless?

RAMACHANDRAN: We try to use indigenous natural resources as building materials. We support the use of indigenous natural materials because that is why it will be least cost. Bamboo, for example, is widely used in many countries -- in Indonesia, India, China, etc. So in such cases, we promote bamboo construction

technology; in other cases, we use what we call earth, mud, pressed mud.

LITTLEJOHNS: Adobe.

RAMACHANDRAN: Yes, you call it adobe here. Pressed blocks. So it is possible for people to build shelter which is adequate and affordable. I don't use catch phrases like "low cost" or anything like that because in each country the material that is used for building materials has to be affordable and that's what we support in our research and development efforts and in the execution of projects in the countries. Like this project, we have projects in now 103 countries around the world and everywhere we use the people themselves in the construction, and this is part of the global centre strategy, namely the enabling strategy, and in warning the people in the planning and in the implementation so that after it is completed it is better maintained.

LITTLEJOHNS: So you have sort of community construction as in the old days in the United States, they used to erect bonds. A whole group of people would gather around to raise a bond. You have the same system?

RAMACHANDRAN: Community-based groups do construct the shelter. We have examples of it in Zimbabwe, Uganda, in many African countries, in Thailand and the same applies now in Viet Nam, Laos and we hopefully will have projects in Cambodia pretty soon.

LITTLEJOHNS: Apart from this bamboo "experiment", do you have any other innovative systems of building?

RAMACHANDRAN: For example, we have sisal which is being used as roofing sheets. Instead of asbestos cement sheets, we have sisal

cement sheets. We have what we call innovative technologies using local materials and at the same time, using modern construction materials and making a mix of them so that it can become affordable, also secure housing, and people do not say that we are trying to only re-invent the past.

LITTLEJOHNS: When you say affordable, what would a house like the one we've just seen in Costa Rica cost to erect? Do you have any idea about that?

RAMACHANDRAN: This is probably about 1,500 US dollars.

LITTLEJOHNS: Very reasonable.

EMEKEKWUE: There is a view that many of the problems currently associated with organization are the results of inadequate and inappropriate responses to the needs of human settlements. What is Habitat doing to address these problems? What is your role?

RAMACHANDRAN: The major point is to convince governments that they cannot build houses for all. Most governments have tried it and have failed in the last decade, two decades. They must become enablists; they must facilitate people to help themselves. They must be catalysts and involve all people, not only the public sector, but the private sectors, both formal and informal, in this whole area of housing and infrastructural services. This is a chain that has happened by governments. Most governments are now moving away from being builders for a few to become catalysts and enablers for all. This means a change of attitude, of public sector officials, local authorities, etc. to involve the people, involve community-based groups, involve non-governmental organizations in the implementational process because no country is

rich enough to build housing for all people, however rich or affluent that country may be.

GARCIA: Dr. Ramachandran, the unprecedented increase in our planet's human population will have, no doubt, economic, social and political implications. I understand that the objectives of your organization -- of Habitat -- is to build houses for almost everyone who needs it by the year 2000. How far have you gone in reaching your goal?

RAMACHANDRAN: The point is, unless we have a goal, no steps will be taken by the government and the people. The goal is adequate shelter for all and in baseball, if I have a batting average of .7 or in cricket, that is a good one. That means we're at least within 70 per cent of the goal. I certainly do not expect to see by the year 2000, everyone has adequate shelter but that is a goal which the United Nations has set. At the (Preparatory Committee) United Nations Conference on Environment and Development last August, they said maybe this goal should be at the year 2020, I said, yes, but let's not postpone starting our work. Two years ago we started this programme and over 60 countries have revised their national housing strategies. That is a very encouraging sign. Further, most of the public officials now are willing to have dialogue with the non-governmental organizations which they would not have had previously and this is the major change of attitude of the public sector officials -- to involve the people, to involve NGOs, etc.

GARCIA: I would like to have a follow-up question. Does your programme extend to villages as well as urban areas and if so, in what way is your organization hampered by the inadequate infrastructure of developing countries?

RAMACHANDRAN: The major point is that our programme is directed both to urban and rural settlements. We have rural housing programmes in many of the countries of Africa and Asia. As you know in Latin America, it's already 75 per cent urbanized, but in Africa, it's going to be 40 per cent by the year 2000 and in Asia, 35 per cent by the year 2000, therefore rural settlements. One problem of rural settlements that is easier to tackle: there is land, as opposed to the problem in urban areas where land is a scarce commodity.

MURPHY: In the 19th century, it was the invention of the wire nail that enabled the very rapid expansion of development here in the United States. Is there any new technology that you can see on the horizon that's going to do a similar thing to help shelter needs in this century?

RAMACHANDRAN: Well, I'm afraid not because many things have been tried. Prefabricated was a solution in the industrialized countries, but prefabricated homes do not appear to be affordable in most of the developing countries at the present time.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why is that?

RAMACHANDRAN: The question of costs. Unless the prefabricated housing comes down dramatically by a factor of two or three, it will not be affordable. Even the prefabricated construction in the east European countries has not satisfied the people at all because everything is stereotyped and it requires a great deal of skill in assembling and putting up prefabricated buildings. Also, transportation costs. Also the costs of having what I call cranes and others to transport these heavy prefabricated panels, etc. It is for that reason that it is not going to be a solution. On the other hand, in situ prefabrication is a possibility and that is one

thing which we are looking at whereas at the site itself you prefabricate and assemble it. This has been tried out in several countries and has been more successful than prefabricated panels built in factories and transported.

MURPHY: What about new technology in other aspects of shelter? For instance, the most basic things are supply of water and the taking away of sewage.

RAMACHANDRAN: In the areas of water and sewage, there have been new technologies, low cost technologies. For example, I can say that we don't have to go 15 feet below ground to have sewage; we have what are low-cost shallow sewage solutions which have been implemented in Rio de Janeiro, in Karachi, Pakistan, etc. So these are the new technologies which are available and which you are now advocating at UNCED as a strategy to implement water supply and sanitation coverage for all by the year 2000.

LITTLEJOHNS: UNCED is the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro.

EMEKEKWUE: Dr. Ramachandran, going back to UNCED. In light of that conference, can you look at a relationship between human settlements and sustainable development?

RAMACHANDRAN: Can I see the difference between them?

EMEKEKWUE: Can you look at the relationship?

RAMACHANDRAN: The relationship is very close. In the case of human settlements, we must use resources without preventing future generations from using these resources. Therefore, efficient use of resources is one of the criteria on which human settlements

planning, development and management has to be hinged. So we feel that sustainable development can really happen only if people are in a position to live and work, earn, and therefore protect the environment. Otherwise they are not going to protect the environment, which is what is happening.

EMEKEKWUE: Do you feel that adequate attention is being focused at this time on the economic and social growth of settlements?

RAMACHANDRAN: Oh yes, I personally believe that human settlements contribute to the alleviation of poverty, for example, to human settlements development. Large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers can be employed both in human settlements construction as well as in infrastructure construction. This is a potential area for employment generation and therefore improving the living conditions of the people. This has happened in many countries and will continue to do so. There is one area in which there will always be employment generation possible. By the year 2000, the planet will have six billion people. Another billion people will be added between 1990 and 2000, and 85 per cent of that growth is going to be in the developing countries. That is the forecast by the World Bank and the UN Population Fund.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE**. Our guest is Dr. Arcot Ramachandran, Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements.

GARCIA: In relation to the question of Obi Emekekwue, I would like to ask the question knowing the cultural and climatic conditions of different countries. Has the UN developed low-cost shelters for poor countries? And secondly, does the UN take into account environment as well as the needs of the grassroots? I mean, let me give you an example: I heard of governments building

the houses with asbestos roofs for a very high price. What alternatives does your organization employ to solve such problems?

RAMACHANDRAN: We don't advocate the use of asbestos cement sheets at all any more. Why do I say anymore? We don't advocate it at all. We would prefer environmentally-sound roofing materials. This is one area where a lot of research is going on at the present time. We used to use galvanized iron sheets, most unsuitable in hot countries, because it's hot inside, both in daytime and at nighttime. That's why I gave the example of sisal cement sheets as roofing materials. The same thing is, for each country you have to have taken into account the climatic conditions and the cultural needs of the people. For instance, in the Middle East countries, they always want to have space around rooms. They don't like high-rise flats; they feel totally uncomfortable in such a place so, in each country, you have to look at the perceptions of the people and then plan accordingly with them, not for them. And this is the fundamental philosophy of Habitat; that we involve the people in the planning of the settlements, in the construction of their housing infrastructure because we feel if they are involved, they maintain it better. And all of our activities are towards environmentally-sound human settlements and projects.

MURPHY: When I was looking at this question, I was struck by two things: one was the great increase in population and obviously, the increase of needs that would be involved there; and the other was that I came across on two or three occasions, a reference to say that the the rich have a prolific use of resources and we can't possibly have that kind of thing available for everybody. Does this mean that we're looking at a future because of these two things -- of diminished expectations for most people?

RAMACHANDRAN: No, I don't believe so. The major point is to more efficiently utilize the resources, recycle the material that we are using more than in the past in order to conserve natural resources for future generations. You will see a change in the attitude of industry, in the kind of products and processes they are using in order to meet this need of sustainable development. It is for this reason that I believe that this conference should give directions, or at least indications to industry that they have to plan ahead and they require ten years time to plan ahead, whether it's the automobile industry or the energy industry or the transportation industry or any of the materials that we use for day-to-day living.

EMEKEKWUE: Dr. Ramachandran, how much attention is directed towards women in the programmes of your organization?

RAMACHANDRAN: That's a very good question. We have had five workshops in the five regions involving women in the planning of human settlements because 50 per cent of the world's population are women and we want women to be actively involved in the planning and in the implementation of projects. Therefore, we have put out publications on women and human settlements development; we have women professionals in the Centres -- two of them -- one of them is coordinator for the whole of east Africa, another is from Latin America, planning of human settlements projects in Latin America. So we involve women very much in our programme of human settlements development.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are women participating in the actual construction of homes in the various countries?

RAMACHANDRAN: You'll see that it's happening in many of the Asian countries. In Indonesia, they even do plastering. I was surprised to see women involved in plastering and finishing work. Women have

been used for carrying loads. That is very common in my country, but that is not the only one. But women are involved. If you see the educational pattern in some of the Asian countries and schools of architecture, 80 to 90 percent are women now.

GARCIA: Solving of the housing problem is relative to market economy. Are you in contact with governments? And, if so, what advice do you offer them? What alternatives? What are the solutions?

RAMACHANDRAN: We are asking governments to have a political will and to decentralize, right to the smallest local authority. It's not enough to decentralize, but to also decentralize the resources to the local authority, so that the local authorities can plan and implement the future expansion that is needed in their cities and their communities. The global strategy for shelter gives directions as to how governments can do it and that's what I said: that 50 to 60 governments have changed their policies over the last two years. This is being reviewed by the General Assembly in the Second Committee, what governments have done in the last two years because every two years we have to indicate what progress has been made or what successes or what failures also.

GARCIA: In most of Latin American countries there is very little, if any, land taxation and economists believe that that is the real source of the problem in my region. Do you plan to encourage landholders to make use of the huge unused lands to build shelters because as you know, most owners would not hold on to so much unused land if they have to pay taxes based upon its value. What are your comments about that?

RAMACHANDRAN: I don't know about Latin America but most countries have a tax on land, unused land, particularly at a higher rate,

than land which is used whether it's for agriculture, for industry or for housing. In the human settlements management programme, we lay great emphasis on recovery of taxes because without resources, no municipality, no city can really plan and execute programmes to solve the living conditions of the people. Municipal tax, municipal land, municipal infrastructure operations and maintenance, municipal institution-building and capacity-building and finally, human resources development. These are the five principal targets that we advise governments on.

GARCIA: Have you been successful?

RAMACHANDRAN: In many countries, yes. But I must specifically say about Latin America, it's changing in the last few years ever since the system of democratic governments have come into play. Costa Rica is an example of a good success. They built a hundred thousand houses on a four-year programme. One of the ministers is now a UN official here, Mr. Zumbado, whom you probably know. So there are countries in Latin America and Central America that have been successful, there have been countries in Asia more successful than some others. The same applies in Africa. But it is a process of converting governments and making them adopt policies which will be more helpful to the people, particularly to the urban and rural poor in constructing their own shelter and their services.

MURPHY: I think that part of the problem is a problem of management basically, not of enforcement but of managing resources. But how are you encouraging governments to change their management? For instance, one of the central things is recycling and one way of going about recycling is to do what they call "green taxes" which, as you know, is to tax detergents, for instance, which aren't biodegradable, or even simple things like deposits on bottles. How can you encourage governments to institute these kind of practices?

RAMACHANDRAN: For example, you'll see a change even in this country. I see a lot more recycling in the last one year than I saw three years ago. People are asked to separate out also their garbage into what is recyclable and what is not recyclable. The same thing, I've seen more widespread use in Europe. A change in attitude, both by industry and by the people themselves has resulted in this practice. In the Third World, 50 to 60 percent of the garbage is recycled. You will see, informal sector people collecting newspapers -- similarly, bottles, tires, batteries, etc. and sending it back to the factories and they get paid for it. So there is this movement what with the informal sector on one side and by industry on the other side to use the materials because they find it is of great value for them and for the resources that they consume. So you will see much more of those recyclable materials being produced and used in the coming decade than ever before. As for the tax for that, if there is an incentive for industry itself to re-use, then there may be no necessity for a tax, but possibly fearing a tax coming later on, they've already started this movement.

EMEKEKWUE: In many African countries, the approach to the problem of human settlements has been a drive towards getting people to move away from the cities to the rural areas. But how good do you think this is bearing in mind that services are only available or mainly available in these urban areas as against the rural areas?

RAMACHANDRAN: I think any attempt to turn back the tide will be a failure. Let us look at history. Europe started urbanization in 1850 and practically completed it by 1950 and there has been, more or less, no growth. 74 to 75 percent is urbanized. Europe, North America, even Latin America. The process of urbanization began in the Third World after 1950, mainly after independence of most of the countries. It is also good for our rural areas that the

pressure on agricultural land is less because then there will be more soil degradation and less opportunities for people and therefore, they are moving into urban areas in search of jobs. This urbanization that is taking place in the developing countries is inevitable, irreversible and any resources to prevent it will be wasted. On the other hand, we should better plan how to manage the urban settlements. We are always confusing urbanization with mega-cities. Urbanization can be anywhere from 20,000 to 20 million. Growth of intermediate and small cities is another area that we are encouraging so that the pressure on the primate city will be much less.

EMEKEKWUE: In other words, you see urbanization as a positive thing?

RAMACHANDRAN: I certainly see it as a positive thing. Less pressure on land, less pressure on resources, less soil degradation, less deforestation, less desertification.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Ramachandran, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**. You've been a most interesting guest on a very interesting subject and we wish you all good luck with your endeavours.

Our guest has been Dr. Arcot Ramachandran, Executive Director of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Obi Emekekwue of the News Agency of Nigeria; Maria Garcia of Nucleo Radio Mil; and Roy Murphy of TV New Zealand.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

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